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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 006316

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: EDUCATION COUNCIL PRESIDENT SUPPORTS
REOPENING OF HALKI

Classified by CDA Nancy McEldowney; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (U) Summary: Erdogan Tezic, president of Turkey's Higher Education Council (YOK), told Charge during an October 17 meeting that he supports the reopening of the Halki seminary, and believes a solution can be found if Greece and Turkey discuss their respective religious minorities. He said Halki should not/not be under YOK authority, but could be supervised by the Education Ministry. Tezic said an exchange program with the State University of New York is currently blocked until a legal framework can be arranged. End Summary.

Halki Tied to Greece-Turkey Relations

2. (U) Charge asked Tezic for his views on the possibility of reopening the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki Seminary, closed since 1971. Despite the many reforms adopted by the GOT in recent years, Halki continues to be a symbol of restrictions on religious freedom.

3. (U) Tezic averred that "no one is more sorry than I" for the decline of Turkey's Greek Orthodox population (now numbering fewer than 2,500). He recalled that he studied both Latin and classical Greek, and has several friends who are former Orthodox priests.

4. (U) Tezic said Halki could be reopened as a higher education institution under the Ministry of Education, but not under YOK. The GOT would be prepared to recognize it as an institution offering a one-year degree, though studies would last three or four years (he did not explain why the GOT would only recognize a one-year degree). He claimed that the Ecumenical Patriarch accepts this idea.

5. (U) Tezic said Halki could not be placed under YOK for a variety of reasons. YOK does not recognize any one-year institutions, nor does it oversee religious institutions. If Halki were under YOK, admissions would have to be based on the standardized university entrance exams, which would not be appropriate for a seminary.

6. (U) To make this arrangement work, he said, the Patriarchate would have to manage Halki through a foundation. In this way, the Education Ministry would inspect the foundation, but not the Patriarchate itself. Tezic acknowledged that the Patriarch opposes the idea of running Halki through a foundation. (Note: Patriarchate officials have told us they cannot accept the idea of exercising their historical authority over Halki through a foundation, or reducing the Patriarch to a foundation board president. End Note.)

7. (U) Before such a legal arrangement can be worked out, however, progress must be made on the political problems that serve as the foundation of the Halki issue, Tezic said. In the past, Greece permitted Turkey to supply the Celal Bayar high school in Thrace with books and teachers, and Turkey, in exchange, allowed Greece to support the Greek high schools in Istanbul. After the emergence of Turkish-Greek conflict in 1955, however, both sides failed to meet their obligations. If these exchanges could be resumed, it would provide political cover for reopening Halki. Tezic said Turkey and Greece need to discuss these issues bilaterally, outside of the EU context, and agree on reciprocal steps to remove restrictions on their respective religious minorities. The U.S. can play a role, particularly by pressing Greece to take up the issue.

SUNY Exchange Program Faces Legal Hurdle

8. (U) Charge noted that the USG places a high priority on education in its relations with Turkey. The U.S. spent USD 15 million on education programs in Turkey in the past six months alone. Most of these programs are focused on disadvantaged families in rural areas, but some involve poor families in urban areas. She noted that the USG has tripled the size of Turkey's Fulbright program in the past two years,

and that the Turkey program now receives more USG funding than any in the world. We want to continue these types of educational exchanges, and expand them whenever possible.

19. (U) Charge said the exchange program between YOK and the State University of New York (SUNY) got off to a good start in 2003. Under one part of the program, students from Turkey's economically depressed southeast have been placed in the SUNY system. However, YOK has not been able to continue the scholarships necessary to maintain the program. She asked what the Embassy can do to help get the program back on track.

10. (U) Tezic described himself as a strong supporter of the SUNY program in general, including the initiative for the southeast, which he said he would try to revive. However, complications over the legal/regulatory framework have blocked the program for the time being. Because the program involves expenditures for teachers' salaries, and because it involves transferring funds to the U.S., he approached the Finance Ministry last year and asked officials there to establish a legal arrangement that would cover the program. The Finance Ministry advised him to develop a regulation, which he did.

11. (U) However, he is unsure whether the regulation provides sufficient legal authority, given that there is no provision in Turkish law covering the types of expenditures involved in the program. Tezic said a finance/tax expert is currently reviewing the regulation and will report to him shortly. If the expert advises him that he can proceed with the program under the regulation, he will raise the matter next week with the YOK assembly and ask for their backing. Tezic said he wants to avoid any possible charges of malfeasance, noting that police recently arrested the president of Van University in a case related to university expenditures. Tezic said this is an internal GOT matter, and there is nothing the Embassy can do to help.

Comment: Fresh Approach on Halki

12. (C) There is no shortage of broad ideas for resolving the Halki situation; roughly once a month the press quotes a GOT official promising an imminent breakthrough based on a sketchy premise. But these reports will be mirages as long as there continues to be no regular dialogue between the GOT and the Patriarchate (let alone between the GOT and the Greek Government). Neither the GOT nor the Patriarchate can open the seminary unilaterally. If there were a regular give and take, we would eventually learn how far the parties were willing to compromise, and the details of an arrangement could be worked out.

13. (C) With Turkey's EU accession talks finally underway, we are looking for ways to encourage a fresh approach to this long-dormant issue. We would be interested in Embassy Athens' and Department views on the efficacy of a coordinated approach to the Turkish and Greek governments. One option is to pursue simultaneous action by Athens and Ankara on parallel tracks. For example, we could press the GOT to engage the GOG in a dialogue aimed at allowing the GOT's Religious Affairs Directorate to open a mosque in Athens, in exchange for which the GOT would negotiate with the Patriarchate an agreement for reopening Halki. Such an agreement would provide mutual cover for each party to compromise on a controversial issue. Though we reject the idea that the rights of the two minorities are linked, both governments insist on linking them politically. With this approach, we would be pressing them to link them in a way that leads to a mutual solution.

MCELDOWNEY